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ABSTRACT

This paper considers discourse models of knowledge and use and social problem solving that revive the tradition of dialectical reasoning (the broader term) or rhetoric, i.e., the art of using language, in speaking or writing, to convince others that something is true, right, or better. Discourse models of knowledge use allow taking the context-bound, tentative nature of research knowledge, as well as the beliefs and purposes of clients and patrons, into consideration. Problems derive from a failure to meet such empirical preconditions (e.g., social organization of discourse), and from the fact that such empirical preconditions pre-suppose concepts of knowledge with an egalitarian rather than an authoritative cast. Where people do not appeal to such standards, discourse may simply reinforce existing inequalities. Social reform and educational change depend in part on a rejection of the dialectical tradition insofar as it involves the language of persuasion rather than that of experiments. These problems are illustrated by looking at pre-suppositions and limitations of argument as a discourse model of knowledge use. In conclusion, argument is contrasted with conversation, and conversation itself is considered as a concept of education. (Author/JD)

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Margret Buchmann

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Abstract

This paper is the second in a series of analyses that focus on knowledge utilization in education. It considers discourse models of knowledge use and social problem solving that revive the ancient tradition of dialectical reasoning, or rhetoric. While discourse is the broader term, rhetoric is the art of using language, in speaking or in writing, so as to convince others that something is true, right, or better. Discourse models of knowledge use allow taking the context-bound, tentative nature of research knowledge as well as the beliefs and purposes of clients and patrons into consideration. All participants can benefit if they put aside attempts to eliminate fallibility or bolster credibility. But there are problems that derive, first, from a failure to meet such empirical preconditions (e.g., social organization of discourse) and, second, from the fact that such empirical preconditions presuppose concepts of knowledge with an egalitarian rather than authoritative cast. Finally, the processes and outcomes of discourse can drift apart from what is true, right, or better. Yet, where people do not appeal to such standards, discourse may simply reinforce existing inequalities. Thus emancipatory social reform and educational change depend in part on a rejection of the dialectical tradition, at least insofar as it involves the language of persuasion rather than that of experiments. These problems are illustrated by looking at presuppositions and limitations of argument as a discourse model of knowledge use. In conclusion, argument is contrasted with conversation, and conversation itself considered as a concept of education.

ARGUMENT AND CONVERSATION AS DISCOURSE MODELS OF KNOWLEDGE USE[1,2]

Margret Buchmann[3]

The juxtaposition between people who live in the world of thought and people who live in the world of action is ancient. One may see it, for example,

> in the main counterposed funerary figures of the Medici Chapel in Florence: Giuliano, muscular as a horse, called from thought to action, sits poised for movement, while facing but not seeing him, Lorenzo--Il Pensieroso--is lost through thought to action, and sits curled beneath a sheltering helmet, immune to outward stimulation. Lorenzo is outside, as it were, a world Giuliano has just entered, and broods upon the meaning of that which Giuliano is content to live. Respectively external and internal to the world, they emblemize the lives of contemplation and of action to which men have in all ages felt themselves alternatively summoned. (Danto, 1973, p. 1)

Can people live with such a juxtaposition today? If not, what can be done about it? Clearly, these are two issues. Yet people usually go straight to the second one, namely, how to bring thought and action together, taking thought to be new knowledge that is to be brought to bear on practice. A supporting argument might sound like this: The world is rapidly changing and knowledge produced at a pace that is accelerating; therefore, intelligent action requires the use of new knowledge. Of course, to an imagination cut off from history, everything is new. But even if a practical problem has no precursor (an unlikely case), knowledge that can help in solving it need not be new.

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[1]Paper presented at the annual convention of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada, 1983.

[2]This paper is the second in a series of analyses focusing on knowledge utilization in education. The first paper is IRT Occasional Paper No. 57, *The use of knowledge: Conceptual problems and empirical confusions,* by Margret Buchmann. Other papers are forthcoming.

[3]Margret Buchmann coordinates the IRT's Conceptual-Analytic Project. She is also an MSU assistant professor of teacher education.

The factor of time does not enter into knowledge and action in terms of strict alignment. Both thought and practice can exceed what is presently known. Thus, when a theory is advanced, its range of implications, practical or otherwise, cannot yet be determined. And poised for movement, one anticipates a future by definition unknown. But action leads one to assume the meaning of things--an assumption that frequently needs revision in retrospect. People who gaze, cut off from outward stimulation, at what other people have left behind are therefore a precious cultural resource.

And what if knowledge *is* new? Where it conflicts with old adages it should perhaps be viewed with the skepticism maintained toward anecdotal data (Campbell, 1975; Meehl, 1971). In the natural sciences, judgments of soundness and plausibility may override new evidence even where it is based on experimental research (Polanyi, 1962; 1967). There are risks attached both ways; the point is that an animus toward received beliefs and a preference for what is new (and tangible) may simply result in eliminating good practices and ideas. On the other hand, the tentativeness of (new) knowledge may be a safety catch that a pretension to usefulness tends to remove.

It makes sense to require that all people should attend to public forms of reasonableness (Green, 1971; Petrie, 1981). Lines of thought and action that draw on collective intelligence and are open to its scrutiny will generally be better than idiosyncratic ones. (Exceptions to this rule only prove its deeper meaning, which is that few and rarely favored individuals will add to the common stock of reason.) But none of this makes for a requirement that new knowledge should inform action or the interpretation of events. On the contrary, wisdom (the ideal of action) is compatible with the most abysmal truisms, such as, for instance, that people ordinarily thrive by

doing the right thing at the right time. As Scriven (1973) points out, historians do very well with notions such as this:

> People *can* commit murder from hatred or greed; that they *often* want food or clothing; that they *sometimes* value their children's lives above their own. (p. 451; emphasis in original)

Trivialities of this sort are not cited in theoretical treatises about human nature, although they can be found in Ecclesiastes. This is not to say that usable knowledge must be trivial or boring; lives and letters and good-natured gossip can be superb sources of information.

For knowledge to be useful, people must be able to grasp it. This is no small matter, as it presupposes either that knowledge already fits the understandings they possess, or that, in learning, people change their minds. But to be usable, knowledge must furthermore be close to people. This is where biography and gossipy talk come into their own (Johnson 1750/1968; Bok, 1982). In attending to specifics and human complexity, these sources of knowledge--including whimsical and ribald jokes--supply the finer and often ephemeral points that solemn generalities miss. Facts and ideas people are supposed to act on must be experienced as personally compelling, for, by its nature, action commits people and is reluctably one's own (Freidson, 1970). From the point of view of knowledge, these non-cognitive extras are not only irrelevant, but likely sources of inferential error.

Theories have objective standing regardless of whether any living person understands, let alone likes or uses them. For the status of an idea, the fact that somebody believes in it is comparatively unimportant. Popper (1975) drives this point home in writing,

> Almost every book is like this: it contains objective knowledge, true or false, useful or useless; and whether anyone ever reads it and really grasps its content is almost accidental. (p. 115)

Action, however, presupposes belief; and beliefs are no less enabling where they draw on personal and communal mythology (Buchmann, 1981). Educational ends may properly direct action although people have never experienced their realization, have no assurance that they will be successful in reaching them, or cannot truly expect to see them realized in full. Yet this need not make action irrational. Moreover, the ends of action can stand in tension or contradiction to what people know.

The work of teachers, for example, is predicated on the belief that a change for the better can be effected by what a teacher does. If students are seen as unchangeable (in educationally relevant aspects), the activities of teaching become pointless. As a basis for action, the belief that students can learn must be upheld whatever test scores, the opinions of parents, and even the firsthand experiences of the teacher may imply to the contrary. This triumph of hope over experience is justified--not because it fits with the data but because it can create new desirable facts.

Knowledge and belief figure differently in the worlds of thought and action. Knowledge cannot justify practice in advance of action, and beliefs can be right without being true (in an empirical sense). By shifting straightways to the knowledge-into-action gear, people jump to conclusions about where commendable action in classrooms and schools will stem from and where it must tend. Discourse models of knowledge use appear to recognize these facts. They allow taking the context-bound, tentative nature of knowledge as well as the beliefs and purposes of clients and patrons into consideration. If they put aside attempts to eliminate fallibility or bolster credibility, all participants can be enlightened (Cronbach, Ambron, Dornbusch, Hess, Hornik, Phillips, Walker, & Weiner, 1980). But there are problems that derive, first, from a failure to meet such empirical preconditions and,

second, from the fact that such empirical preconditions presuppose concepts of knowledge with an egalitarian rather than authoritative cast. Finally, the processes and outcomes of discourse can drift apart from what is true, right, or better. Yet, where people do not appeal to such standards, discourse may simply reinforce existing inequalities.

These problems can be illustrated by looking at argument as a discourse model of knowledge use in contrast to conversation. I will identify presuppositions and limits of these different ways of thinking about knowledge use and analyze, in particular, what each of them seems to imply for equitable participation. But first I shall turn to a general clarification of discourse models of knowledge use and their requirements.

Why Talk?

Epistemologically speaking, laypeople and researchers are not very differently situated as long as knowledge is considered as "indirect, presumptive, obliquely and incompletely corroborated at best" (Campbell, 1975, p. 112). Where knowledge is less than certain and stake-holders disagree, it will be good to talk things over.

Typically, discourse approaches to the use of knowledge and social problem solving revive the ancient tradition of dialectical reasoning, or rhetoric. While discourse is the broader term, rhetoric is the art of using language, in speaking or in writing, so as to convince others that something is true, right, or better. Even if truth and rightness are not taken as relative, one still has to ask, "Better for whom?" Thus knowledge, values, and interests are important. According to Aristotle, there are four aspects to the art of rhetoric. Rhetoric is corrective when it furthers the aims of truth and justice; it is instructive when it reaches an audience that is not susceptible to logic alone; it is suggestive when it brings to mind what could

be argued on the other side of an issue, thus securing a better grasp of the whole; it is defensive when it strengthens one's capacity to support and supplement a point of view. Rhetoric has, therefore, cognitive as well as interactive or process goals; it aims to teach as well as to persuade. Where the change of beliefs without care for truth and justice becomes the goal, the arts of rhetoric are abused rather than used. The popular understanding of rhetoric identifies it with this abuse--perhaps with good reasons, for the arts of rhetoric are profoundly political.

In general, people talk because knowledge is uncertain, the outcome of action ambiguous, because their interests and beliefs differ--and because they like to talk. Thus discourse is predicated upon epistemological and psychological conditions. People speculate on the course of events after the fact, offer comments on a plan, question proofs offered by parties, and dispute the relevance and value of evidence because they have a stake in the outcomes of social action, and the feedback from data is rarely clear. In all of this, argument may play a role, though it represents only one manner of thinking and speaking.

Thus, talking about the theory, practice, and goals of education should be helpful and appropriate for the following reasons: (1) educational knowledge claims are context-bound and tentative (and this holds for practical, personal, and theoretical knowledge alike); (2) participants are committed to manifold and often conflicting goals; and (3) educational research itself involves rhetorical choices in data presentation.[4] These three points turn on

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[4]Gusfield (1976) concludes that the scientific interpretation of data involves "an element of choice and both enlists and generates a context, a set of meanings which give content and imagery to . . . data" (p. 32). See also Gusfield (1981) and Angelo (1979a; 1979b).

the assumption that there is no direct route to knowledge *or* social action, no route that can steer clear of what people say and what they believe.

The discourse approach to knowledge use highlights the interactive aspects of knowledge use in education. It appears to be adequate to both the epistemological limitations of relevant knowledge and the fact that social and individual action proceed from interest and belief. Thus people have ample reason to talk, but it is not so clear that discourse will make things more equitable and rational. Educational discourse has purposes and functions beyond those of advancing the clarity of arguments or the rationality of action. As Apple (1981) writes in his review of the recent National Society for the Study of Education yearbook on philosophy and education,

> Too many philosophers still assume that educational language and theory exist only to present rational arguments--arguments that would be better made if only we could be clearer about what we mean to say. A significant portion of educational discourse, however, is not "meant" in this way at all. It performs social functions. It provides political or intellectual affiliation by creating bonds between groups of people. It legitimates educational, social, and political activity by creating a sense that something is being done by people who know what they are doing. In the process it prescribes and proscribes action by defining certain things as worthy and other things as deviant. (p. 420)[5]

If knowledge use in education is to be a form of discourse that does not perform social and political functions alone, the social organization of discourse must be democratic; as Cohen and Garet (1975) explain,

> All interested parties must be able to initiate discussion, to establish or influence the rules of conversation, to put forward statements, to request elaboration and clarification, and to call other statements into question. (pp. 42-43)

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[5]Edelman (1977), for instance, describes the creation and management of beliefs through the political language of the helping professions that defines people and their actions, manages their self-perceptions and allegiances, and determines who has access to scarce resources in education and elsewhere.

The requirement for a democratic organization of discourse can more easily be met where all participants distance themselves from authoritative views of knowledge, whether based on science, personal experience, or social lore.

Yet, epistemological openness cannot establish the social conditions for equitable discourse in groups with diverse participants. For where interests conflict, there are few incentives for giving up increments of power and status that come with experience and expert knowledge. The cumulative effects of past patterns of participation are quite resistant to change. And even a democratic organization of discourse cannot make people equally good at talking, let alone arguing. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the ends and commitments that make people act and think the way they do will surface in discourse situations with diverse participants.

Therefore, participants also need to have certain dispositions and attitudes; they will have to be well-intentioned (almost high-minded), reasonable, and to some extent detached from immediate and particular interests. All have to be patient, and some courageous. In addition, it is necessary that people share (or come to share) substantive norms of communication. Norms of communication flow from organizing purposes and routine activities in the life and work of people. The motivational basis of action is organized in these norms and in patterns of speech. Talk works differently in different groups, is about different things, and aims at different outcomes.

This brings me back to the issues raised in the introduction. Knowledge utilization as (equitable) discourse, involving, for instance, educational researchers and teachers and not favoring either, may be desirable and fitting, but is it likely to work in fact? To address this question, I will discuss knowledge use as argument in the next section, considering the nature of argument and of people who love to argue, the outcomes of argument, and

assumptions about knowledge and action that argument models of knowledge use entail.

Knowledge Use as Argument

Are reforms best seen as reasoned arguments? Some social scientists strongly support this view. Thus Dunn (1982) writes,

> The transactional model supplies the contours of a critical social science of knowledge application, that is, a social science which uncovers and raises to a level of explicit consciousness those unexamined prior assumptions and implicit standards of assessment that shape and also distort the production and use of knowledge. (pp. 295-296)

He stresses that the argumentative model of knowledge use may contribute to emancipatory social reform and explains, "The success of reforms depends upon rationally motivated consensus that some future social state is possible and desirable" (p. 323). Here a number of assumptions seem problematic. Consensual validation does, for one thing, not guarantee truth or rightness, and neither is it their sole source (Scriven, 1972). Put simply, the loner need not be wrong. For another thing, action is not always the better for rational motivation, consensual or not. And does the better argument have a peculiar force? Perhaps, but so have the beliefs and personal experiences of people and the anecdotes they hear (Nisbett & Ross, 1980).

The voice of argument (just as that of experience and social lore) can distort the facts; it is a kind of dress rehearsal of speech with its own dramatic purposes. Other limitations of argument as a model of knowledge use derive from the influence of the rules governing the interaction of its subject matter (not everything worth knowing is discussable), the mutual relations of participants (differences in power and status count), and the outcomes one can expect.

To assess the argument model of knowledge use, it is important to realize that differences in power and status already count when people settle what should be discussed; not every group has what it takes to make a problem a legitimate issue for public debate. As Gusfield (1981) points out,

> The public arena is not a field on which all can play on equal terms. . . . At any specific moment, all possible parties to the issue do not have equal abilities to influence the public. They do not possess the same degree or kind of authority to be legitimate sources of definition of the reality of the problem. (pp. 8-9)

Disputation always favors some people, and it is useful to recall that it has flourished most at times when all important issues (e.g., the grounds of knowledge and action, the distribution of power and rewards) had already been settled, as it were, out of court. Furthermore, in the heyday of dialectics, participation patterns were set by social predestination and inequality--factors that have hardly lost all potency today. Yet some contemporary philosophers and social theorists show great faith in the redeeming power of argument. Thus Habermas (1971, 1973)[6] describes an "ideal speech situation" undistorted by power and interest; he makes the surprising claim that beliefs that may legitimate action can only be formed under conditions of absolutely free and unlimited debate. If one took this dictum seriously, one would have to write off most actions as either unjustified or unjustifiable. And why is it that talk unlimited should fix all social problems? Debate not only introduces its own purposes, but can make adversaries out of people.

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[6]Habermas provides the clearest exposition of the term "ideal speech situation" in works that are not yet available in English. These works as well as Habermas' views on language use and its preconditions are, however, discussed in a monograph by Geuss (1982).

Argument as an Adversary Paradigm:
The Process and Its Purposes

The general notion of knowledge use as discourse depends on a belief that one can do things with words, a belief not universally shared and only partially true. That is to say, words do not get all that is necessary done. The notion shows a trust in language and linguistic transactions that is decidedly romantic. Thus Popper (1971, 1975) associates the pursuit of truth and scientific objectivity with free criticism, assuming that its practice can be blind with regard to authority and personal interest. Popper is rightly unwilling to make the approximation to truth depend on the personal dispositions of scientists. But he seems to forget that the willingness to be proven wrong over and over again and a faithful attention to the merits of a case (regardless of where it comes from) require a distinctive purity of motives. Mill (1840/1963) is less sanguine about the process and outcomes of debate among people who differ in their beliefs. He contends,

> In truth, a system of consequences from an opinion, drawn by an adversary, is seldom of much worth. Disputants are rarely sufficiently masters of each other's doctrines, to be good judges of what is fairly deducible from them, or how a consequence which seems to flow from one part of the theory may or may not be defeated by another part. To combine the different parts of a doctrine with one another, and with all admitted truths, is not indeed a small trouble, or one which a man is often inclined to take for other people's opinions. Enough if each does it for his own, which he has a greater interest in, and is more disposed to be just to. Were we to search among men's recorded thoughts for the choicest manifestations of human imbecility and prejudice, our specimens would be mostly taken from their opinions of the opinions of one another. (pp. 130-131)

These tart observations balance the picture. They suggest that the requirement for knowledge to be close to people may apply even at the verbal level of knowledge use and to people adept at the rhetorical arts. Everyone is more just to their own, whether kith and kin or ideas. It is counterintuitive to assume that interest in ideas is inherently fair and knows nothing of personal

commitment. It is also not clear that blandness brings one closer to knowledge and understanding. This is what Boring (1963) calls the paradox of scientific controversy. It imposes strict limits on the viability of an argument model of knowledge use when people differ not only in opinion, but in power, status, and argumentative ability as well.

For, argumentative fencing depends on verbal agility. The use of words is strategic and tactical, and the name of the game is war (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Levels of sophistication shape argumentative outcomes, and the possession of a special or technical vocabulary strengthens one's position--regardless of whether this vocabulary is informative or vacuous and ornamental. Meehl's (1971) hierarchical example makes this point vivid:

> The parish priest can refute the theological objections of an unlettered Hausfrau parishioner. The priest, in turn, will lose a debate with the intellectual village atheist. C.S. Lewis will come out ahead of the village atheist. But when C.S. Lewis tangles with Bertrand Russell, it gets pretty difficult to award the prizes. (p. 71)

All down the line, sound ideas or ways of acting do not guarantee winning a dispute. We can say that arguments among people who differ may invoke knowledge from different sources. Yet the person or group that wins the argument may not have the best knowledge: most useful, defensible, or rich. Conversely, failure to win is not a good reason to give up beliefs and practices. Thus it seems a mistake to tie the search for knowledge and ways of diffusing and using it to argumentation. We have no reason to assume that premises that need to be guessed at, terms without clear definitions, oblique references, and beliefs that are not debatable must be associated with wrongheaded ideas or indefensible lines of action.

The conflation of wisdom and argument that argument models of knowledge use presuppose relates to the beginnings of philosophy in its confused combination of the love of wisdom and the love of argument (Rorty, 1982). This

ambivalent heritage is problematic when the love of argument is identified--substantively and methodologically--with the love of wisdom, and this mistaken identification comes to be influential as a conception of what legitimates action.

The genuine continuity of argument models of knowledge use with the classic and medieval tradition of rhetoric is a continuity, too, in that the way of argument is seldom that of the mother tongue (see O'son, 1977). People can be shrewd and, for that matter, right without mastering argumentative moves or necessarily feeling confined by them. And what about the subject matter of argument? As Connelly and Clandinin (1981-1982) maintain, the personal knowledge that makes people act the way they do may be indisputable. Some commitments are both too elusive and too firmly engrained to be touched by argument. This may have costs in terms of truth, but can help people to be steady in their pursuit of virtuous action.

On the other hand, the public accepts science not because it shares the scientific conception of reality, but because of the authority of science. Scientific knowledge and judgment are opaque and indisputable for most people. Thus Polanyi (1967) contends that if laypeople

> ever venture seriously to dissent from scientific opinion, a regular argument may not prove feasible. It will almost certainly prove impracticable when the question at issue is whether a certain set of evidence is to be taken seriously or not. . . . the scientist's blunt, unreasoning judgment . . . rejects at a glance a set of data that seem convincing to the layman. He will demand in vain that the evidence should at least be properly examined, and will not understand why the scientist, who prides himself on welcoming any novel idea with an open mind and on holding his own scientific theories only tentatively, sharply refuses his request. (pp. 540-541)

Neither is public debate likely to expose scientific error.

So what would diverse people talk about and by what rules? It seems that argument models of knowledge use exemplify the definition of a public problem

(namely, how to achieve wise action) by a special constituency for two reasons. First, to see knowledge as the director of practice and change is a partial, if not partisan view. People whose lives are tied up with knowledge will value knowledge; if they are part of a culture that sees utility as a measure of what is good, they will be disposed to regard knowledge as useful (Buchmann, 1982). Since, second, people whose lives are tied up with knowledge also value argument and tend to be good at it, they may see this form of discourse and all it entails as the best way to learn and to get somewhere in social action.

Again, it is useful to consider more disenchanted views of argument, both in relation to the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of wisdom. French intellectual life is a display of argument, and a recent history of 19th and 20th century France with the revealing title, *Intellect and Pride* (Zeldin, 1980), characterizes the spirit of disputation in this period as follows:

> Inevitably, superficial cleverness, the appearance of thoughtfulness combined with a tireless verbosity, the ability to dispute about anything, publicly and at all times, were the criteria of success. Arguments were therefore cultivated for their own sake, not from an interest in truth; a complete lack of intellectual curiousity was easily compatible with this verbal fencing. (p. 208)

Some contemporary philosophers (Nozick, 1981; Rorty, 1982) raise similar concerns about analytic philosophy, to which most Anglo-American philosophers are socialized. They note the difference between the love of argument and that of wisdom and wonder whether the adversarial model of discourse tends to substitute the goal of winning for that of understanding.[7] Thus Rorty (1982) remarks,

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[7]Boring (1950) discusses this phenomenon in his "Psychology of Controversy"; he notes that argument has all the elements of a fight that people like to win, regardless of how deserving they or their case may be.

> A nation can count itself lucky to have several thousand relatively leisured and relatively unspecialized intellectuals who are exceptionally good at putting together arguments and pulling them apart. . . . However . . . we are in bad faith insofar as we tend to take credit for being wise as well as clever. We are not entitled to this double dollop of self-esteem. (pp. 220-221)[8]

He also cites Moulton (p. 230), who emphasizes the problematical effects of this discourse model on its subject matter and our collective progress toward truth:

> We understand earlier philosophers as if they were addressing adversaries instead of trying to build a foundation for scientific reasoning and to explain human nature. Philosophers who cannot be recast into an adversarial mold are likely to be ignored. (p. 230)

In the argumentative mode, thought turns upon itself with little mercy; this is the proof of its quality. In the mode of action and creation, thought takes wings; it is decisive and confident. Thus, in his historical work on the discipline of psychology, Boring (1963) concludes that progress toward truth needs effective prejudice--vision and batlike blindness--as well as controversy and judiciousness. However, he warns that a scientist must not "be the judge too often, for then the assured, prejudiced, productive personality might get 'squeezed out,' and science would be the loser" (p. 83).

The process of argument does bring values into play, such as being clear, logical, and hardheaded. But it is restrictive, almost punitive; besides, people who are tough-minded can be quite obtuse. What gets edited out by argument and for its purposes may be central for action and understanding.

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[8]The parallel between the two historical cases goes deeper than that. Just as French "official" philosophers assumed that they had only to expound a truth that was already known, analytic philosophers tend to believe that they have *the* conceptual questions, and that, hence, only skillful exposition is needed. In its comfortable assumption that all is known, analytic philosophy resembles medieval scholasticism.

Outcomes of Argument

If conviction is the aim, argumentation is often a poor means. For one cannot convince a person of something without knowing their way of thinking; this means also to know how they have reached their conclusions. These matters are found out by listening, not by talking, and may require a delayed response or no response at all. On the outcomes of argument, and on people who argue, I will quote the reflections of several fictional characters.

In Kennedy's (1936/1981) novel, *Together and Apart*, two young people talk. Here the young man speaks first:

> "Plenty of the men have most interesting minds, and lots to say that is worth hearing. Of course none of them could get a Balliol scholarship to save their lives, but that's only one way of judging people's minds. And a rather narrow way. . . ."
>
> "Yes," said Eliza eagerly.
>
> "I mean . . . my education was all a preparation for a certain mental virtuosity, a very hard, clear, reasoned way of thinking, and examining evidence, and defending a logical position. I was taught to regard anybody who didn't bear the hall-mark of this training as wooly-minded and half-educated. It's a useful training in its way as far as it goes. . . .
>
> "But," he continued, "if you really want to find out what other people are thinking, and how they've reached their conclusions, it's no use at all. You can argue the hind leg off a donkey, but that won't teach you any more about donkeys. Whatever method you may have used in forming your own opinions, you must understand other people's methods before you can hope to get anyone to agree with you. You'll never induce a man to change his mind by making him look silly. You merely put his back up." (p. 300)

In Trollope's (1862/1981) *Orley Farm*, several lawyers discuss the question of a reform in certain trial procedures as follows:

> "I think that the matter is one open to discussion," said the host. "Well, I hope so," said Graham. "At any rate I have heard no arguments which ought to make us feel that our mouths are closed."
>
> "Arguments on such a matter are worth nothing at all," said the baron. "A man with what is called a logical turn of mind

> may prove anything or disprove anything; but he never convinced anybody. On any matter that is near to a man's heart, he is convinced by the tenour of his own thoughts as he goes on living, not by the arguments of a logician, or even by the eloquence of an orator. Talkers are apt to think that if their listener cannot answer them they are bound to give way; but non-talkers generally take a very different view of the subject." (p. 229)

Talkers often delude themselves about what success in argument entails. If their listeners cannot answer them, this need not mean that they have given way or changed their minds. No one can feel concerns or act on principles that they have not made their own. On the other hand, if one is busy finding holes in what other people are saying or is eager to score a point, what one can learn from the encounter is restricted by these purposes. Thus one is also not likely to change one's mind. In either case, if the knowledge offered is precious and unequally shared, these outcomes are disappointing. They also throw doubt on Dunn's (1982) notion that argument as a model of knowledge use will contribute to individual and collective learning capacities. Related to this, one must ask whether argument can make the contributions to emancipatory social reform, making people more equal as rational agents, that theorists like Dunn or Habermas hope for.

The question of equality has been a theme throughout this paper, and the following facts can be secured from the analysis. Epistemic and discourse communities differ as such and by goals, status, and the power to enforce interests. Far from representing an undistorted speech situation, the concept of argument is an emblem of these differences. Argument has no particular enabling or purifying force but imports its own distortions (such as adversarial attitude, goal substitution, censorship) into discourse--uncertainly related to action anyway.

All this can be summarized by saying that arguments, though sometimes necessary, are not always useful or nice. To advocate the practice of

argument means at best to endorse, without fear or favor, the pursuit of knowledge in one of its forms, another being bold hypotheses tenaciously held. At worst, argumentation among diverse participants (knowledge producers and intended knowledge users; scientists and representatives of the public) encourages borrowing the authority of science for interested purposes. Merton (1942) believes that "the possibility of exploiting the credulity, ignorance and dependence of the layman" (p. 125) is considerably reduced when scientists and the public keep well apart.

> To the extent that the scientist-layman relation does become paramount, there develop incentives for evading the mores of science. The abuse of expert authority and the creation of pseudo-sciences are called into play when the structure of control exercised by qualified compeers is rendered ineffectual. . . . [Scientific] authority can be and is appropriated for interested purposes, precisely because the laity is in no position to distinguish spurious from genuine claims to such authority. The presumably scientific pronouncements of totalitarian spokesmen on race or economy or history are for the uninstructed laity of the same order as newspaper reports of an expanding universe or wave mechanics. In both instances, they cannot be checked by the man-in-the-street and in both instances, they may run counter to common sense. If anything, the myths will seem more plausible and are certainly more comprehensible to the general public than accredited scientific theories, since they are closer to commonsense experience and to cultural bias. (Merton, 1942, p. 125)

And it is not only laypeople that can be duped by discussions in the social and political arena, where manipulation of beliefs and obfuscation of issues are operating goals of discourse. Scientists may not be well equipped to cross borders either.

> The role of the researcher as a consultant rather than actor guiding his own action maximizes the belief manipulation interest in research reports. . . . The naively idealistic scientistically trained social scientist who enters this arena unaware of the belief manipulation component to the belief assertions produced by the research establishment which he is entering may indeed become an unwitting co-conspirator in this mystification. (Campbell, 1982, pp. 334-335).

This situation is hardly improved where scientists go out of their way to admit statements based on commonsense beliefs and cultural bias as entries into debate on equal footing with scientific findings and adjudicated solely by reference to utility.

Utility as the Saving Virtue?

It is important to reduce people's overconfidence in data, to point out that data interpretation makes heavy use of theory, and that data seen from different points of view can support theories that may be mutually inconsistent. What follows from this is that truth is difficult to come by. It does not follow that knowledge is whatever works for me or what people have decided to call knowledge. For sociologists, suspending the question of the validity of knowledge claims is a methodological move. As Berger and Luckmann (1967) insist,

> The sociology of knowledge must concern itself with whatever passes for "knowledge" in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such "knowledge." (p. 3)

This move does not imply that all knowledge claims are of equal merit or that all social constructions of reality are true. Thus Merton (1976) attempts to correct for overinterpretations of the statement, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" by adding, "And if men do *not* define real situations as real, they are nevertheless real in their consequences" (p. 178). In their work on knowledge use, Lindblom and Cohen (1979) put aside such cautions. They cheerfully assert that, "whether it is true or false, knowledge is knowledge to anyone who takes it as a basis for some commitment or action" (p. 12), and make clear that they will call it knowledge even if it is false.

Conceptualizing truth as entirely relative and up for grabs erodes the basis for reasoned talk in education; specifically, it reduces the grounds on which social actions, beliefs, or institutions can be criticized. But not all knowledge claims stand on a par where grounding in facts and careful reasoning are concerned. Not all views of teaching are equally appropriate images of professional work. Nor do sheer strength of belief and power of persuasion account for the defensibility of large- or small-scale changes in schools. The equity problem that arises through suspending standards of truth and rightness stems from the fact that, apart from their independent value, such standards have worked for disadvantaged groups. On occasion, people who hold stakes but little power have been able to advance their goals by appeals to the facts of the case. Campbell (1982) makes this point central to his response to Dunn's (1982) article, "Reforms as Arguments":

> Rather than accepting for themselves the model of advocacy science focussed on the persuasion of audiences, it seems to me that out-of-power minorities would be better [off] to maintain the traditional distinction and expose as false, the value-biased distortions of establishment belief assertions made in the name of science and to devote their own research efforts, such as they can afford and squeeze in, to correcting those biases in the name of truth. (Campbell, 1982, p. 335)

It is the difference between persuasive bias and accurate description that allows one to criticize "false consciousness, exploitative mystification, unwarranted reification, and the like" (Campbell, 1982, p. 329).

Thus emancipatory social reform depends in significant part on a rejection of the dialectical tradition, at least insofar as it involves the language of persuasion rather than that of experiments. Emphasizing the interactive, rhetorical element in knowledge use may reinforce existent inequalities in social and educational institutions. In the attempt to be even-handed about knowledge claims, we may actually do away with an ultimate resource of the disadvantaged, that of speaking truth to power.

In what follows, I will explore a discourse model of knowledge use less subject to the distortions identified for argument and more liable to promote equity. Provocatively, this approach to knowledge use as discourse might be labeled the gossip model, though I have chosen conversation as a term at once broader and more serious.

Knowledge Use as Conversation: Or Is It Education?

Argument involves contestants; conversation involves partners. In conversation, ideas (where they exist) collide and mingle with other ideas and are diluted and complicated in the process. The pleasant tone of conversation is inimical to doctrinnaire notions. In conversation, one may differ and still not disagree (Oakeshott, 1962); the defensive, corrective, and didactic aspects of rhetoric are out of place. People do not insist that partners follow, it is enough that they enter into conversation. Thus conversation is a great respecter of differences and ranges easily over different "provinces of meaning" (Schutz, 1962): dreams, play, science, and action.

Like conceptual clarification, conversation can enlarge a conceptual repertoire and the imagination and give a sense of new alternatives, contexts, and languages (Rorty, 1982). Its teachings are tactful and can be intoxicating. To draw another example from fiction, in *Old New York*, Wharton (1924/1978) has a young and unsophisticated New Yorker of the mid-19th century "do" his grand tour of Europe. Somewhere in the mountains, he meets an Englishman. They settle down to an evening of talk:

> When Lewis joined his host it had been with the secret hope of at last being able to talk; but when the evening was over (and they kept it up to the small hours) he perceived that he had chiefly listened. Yet there had been no sense of suppression, of thwarted volubility; he had been given all the openings he wanted. Only, whenever he produced a little fact it was instantly overflowed by the other' imagination till it burned like a dull pebble tossed into a rushing stream. For whatever Lewis said was seen by his companion

> from a new angle, and suggested a new train of thought; each commonplace item of experience became a many-faceted crystal flashing with unexpected fires. The young Englishman's mind moved in a world of associations and references far more richly peopled than Lewis's; but his eager communicativeness, his directness of speech and manner, instantly opened its gates to the simpler youth. It was certainly not the Madeira which sped the hours and flooded them with magic; but the magic gave the Madeira--excellent, and reputed of its kind, as Lewis afterward learned--a taste no other vintage was to have for him. (p. 395)

As they go on talking during this journey, Lewis learns to see art in a completely new way; he honors this vision by his whole life.

Conversations can be long, life-long, inconclusive as in marriage, and are continued in the absence of the partner. Arguments have an inherent drive toward conclusions, but conversations are not driven at all. They begin with differences or notions often vaguely apprehended and, after a while, do not so much end as are abandoned. Alternating between quick forays into the unknown and an attitude of wait-and-see, conversational moves are well suited to the complex relations of time with action and knowledge. Arguments favor the here and now, but conversation assigns importance to history.

Oakeshott (1962) conceives of education as a conversation in which a variety of voices speak through history. For him, neither education nor conversation can be identified with argument and inquiry:

> We are urged, for example, to regard all utterances as contributions (of different but comparable merit) to an inquiry, or a debate among inquirers, about ourselves and the world we inhabit. But this understanding of human activity and intercourse as inquiry, while appearing to accommodate a variety of voices, in fact recognizes only one, namely, the voice of argumentative discourse, the voice of "science," and all others are acknowledged merely in respect of their aptitude to imitate this voice. Yet, it may be supposed that the diverse idioms of utterance which make up current human intercourse have some meeting-place. . . . And, as I understand it, the image of this meeting-place is not an inquiry or an argument, but a conversation. (p. 197)

Oakeshott adds,

> Practical enterprise is recognized not as an isolated activity but as a partner in a conversation, and the final measure of intellectual achievement is in terms of its contribution to the conversation in which all universes of discourse meet. (p. 199)

Practice has its own voice, which need not be assimilated to the voice of argument nor requested to seek its guidance. Science likewise need not be anything other than itself: It can speak to the mind and about truth with a clear understanding that meaning in the context of science is not that of ordinary intentional discourse.

In conversation, people of thought and people of action can please themselves and be true to type. Self-constituted elites or self-important individuals will not fare well in conversation. Here one comes close to people, to what they know, desire, imagine, and believe in. Conversation need not be competitive; it is, however, an exchange in which the power of mind, good sense, and moral sentiments of a person come to be revealed. As Johnson said, "men might be very eminent in a profession, without our perceiving any particular power of mind in them in conversation" (Boswell, 1799/1966, p. 1078). In this sense, conversation is a more stringent test than argument.

What makes conversation attractive is its reciprocal quality, the breadth of subject matter and variety of voices compatible with it, and the surprising turns it may take. Conversations have flexible rules of relevance and evidence. All manner of impressions, ideas, and experiences can be brought up. In argument, people restrain themselves and say what they can get away with. But conversation thrives on communicativeness, even volubility; tentative notions and allusions are all right. Thus, conversational exchanges are not disconcerted by ideals of perfection in clarity and coherence. One may get answers to questions one never thought of asking (but ought to have asked) or

have one's answers answered. Yet, conversation is not random; it can include argument and has its own logical postulates. Thus it is not mere talk. The conduct of conversation presupposes good faith, some common purpose or willingly accepted direction, the assumption that participants say things they believe to be relevant, and that they will attend (in some fashion) to what their partners say (Grice, 1975).

Conversation can, however, not establish knowledge. "The foundation," as Johnson stressed, "must be laid by reading. General principles must be had from books, which, however, must be brought to the test of real life. In conversation, you never get a system" (Boswell, 1799/1966, p. 624).

Thus, conversation may be the ideal of *active* knowledge, but it is not the context or method by which people come to know things accurately, as part of formal structures that combine efficient expression with generality of application. Everyone can engage in conversation, but it is not everything. And conversation is educative only where people already know something:[9] themselves, their business, a poem, or the way to prepare a sample for an electron microscope.

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[9]This precondition has also been noted in Yonemura's (1982) paper, "Teacher conversations: A potential source of their own professional growth."

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